

## Destination Europe? Migration Decisions of African Resettlement Refugees

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# BAMF-Brief Analysis

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Destination Europe?

## Migration Decisions of African Resettlement Refugees

by Maria Bitterwolf, Tatjana Baraulina, Inara Stürckow and Judith Daniel

This Brief Analysis discusses the migration decisions, migration trajectories and migration destinations of refugees with African nationalities who came to Germany within the resettlement programme in 2012 and 2014.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Migration motives

- Ethnic and religious conflicts were the main reasons why 60 % of the African resettlement refugees in the sample had left their homes. Despotism and the unlawful actions of state bodies triggered the decision to migrate of 22 % of these refugees. 10 % of the refugees stated discrimination and a lack of prospects as the central motives for their migration. A small share of 5 % moved to join their spouses who had already left the country. 3 % of the refugees were women who had fled from sexual violence.

#### Migration destinations

- Only 3 % of the African resettlement refugees preferred Europe as their primary destination. The favoured destinations were located in Africa, as well as on the Arabian Peninsula. For many years, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have been the main destinations for the African refugees under research.

- African refugees were frequently unable to remain permanently in the destination countries to which they had initially migrated to, because of problems related to residence rights, as well as exploitation and various violations of personal rights. The majority of refugees had stayed in at least two countries in North Africa or in the Arabian Peninsula, before they arrived in Germany. 25 % of them had tried to start a new life in at least four countries in succession.
- The circumstances in which refugees and other migrants lived in the North African states and in the states of the Arabian Peninsula have worsened as a result of the political turmoil and civil wars. It can be presumed that refugees from the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa are currently attempting to open up new destination regions for themselves. Despite the considerable risks, many of them set off on the perilous route to Europe.

According to information provided by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of irregular entries to Europe over the Mediterranean increased from 10,000 persons in 2010 to 216,000 persons in 2014. The dramatic rise in the number of crossings continued in 2015. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that more than one million people came to Italy and Greece by sea last year (IOM 2016). Among all people who came irregularly over the Mediterranean, refugees from various African states form the second-largest group, after persons from Syria (UNHCR 2014).

The quantitative development and the dramatic events occurring during the sea crossings are frequently in the focus of media reporting. There are also frequent reports on the reasons why Syrian nationals become displaced

## WHAT IS RESETTLEMENT?

Resettlement is an internationally recognised refugee protection tool to resolve long-lasting refugee crises. Persons of different nationalities or stateless people who search for a protection in a third country and fall within the mandate of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) under the Geneva Refugee Convention, are accepted for resettlement. Resettlement addresses refugees in third countries, who cannot return home because of continued conflict, wars, and persecution, and who live in perilous situations or have no integration opportunities in the countries, where they have sought protection.

States willing to grant protection to such refugees enable them to establish a long-term livelihood. Amongst other countries, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway and 14 EU Member states are the main host countries of the resettlement refugees. Germany has been receiving resettlement refugees since 2012. Contingents of 300 persons per year came to Germany in 2012 to 2014. The resettlement programme has been continued since 2015 with higher resettlement contingents. Germany cooperates with the UNHCR to select those refugees who satisfy the resettlement criteria.

(United Nations Refugee Agency 2015). However, less is known about why people from African states leave their countries of origin, and how they make their decisions about their migration destinations. The Migration Policy Institute argues that African migration has been described in the public and academic debate as a one-dimensional process towards Europe (Townsend/Oomen 2015), and

that the complexity and dynamics of migration decisions have been completely disregarded.

This paper provides insights into the migration decisions, migration trajectories and migration destinations of people from the Horn of Africa and from Sudan/South Sudan. The analysis is based on data gathered by the Research Centre of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

A total of 151 adult resettlement refugees of African nationalities were accepted in 2012 and 2014. The UNHCR drew up an acceptance dossier for each person. The dossiers provide information regarding the reasons for leaving the country of origin, as well as on the migration destinations and on life conditions in third countries, until the time of being accepted in Germany. This analysis uses data based on the anonymised dossiers information. Furthermore, this report is complemented by examples of the individual migration stories from qualitative interviews with African resettlement refugees, which were carried out within the BAMF Study on Resettlement.

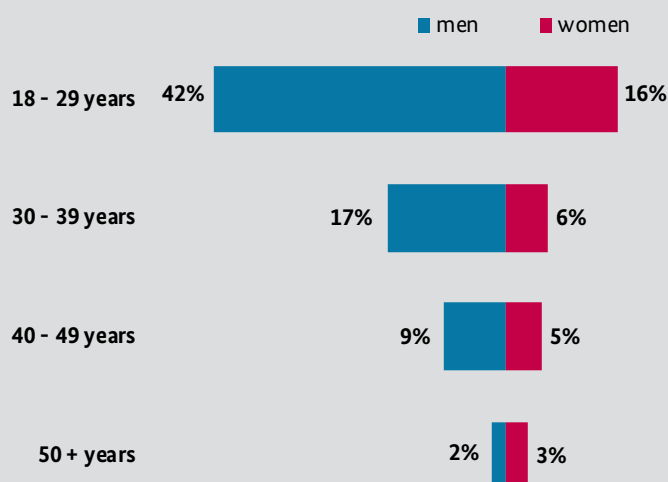
## THE BAMF STUDY ON RESETTLEMENT

The BAMF Research Centre evaluates the German resettlement programme. It studies the integration process of resettlement refugees who were received in Germany in 2012 and 2014. The study is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 100 refugees, who live in different German regions. They were interviewed on their migration biographies, experiences with resettlement to Germany and integration strategies. At the same time, expert interviews with local integration actors have been conducted, such as with social workers providing counselling for refugees.

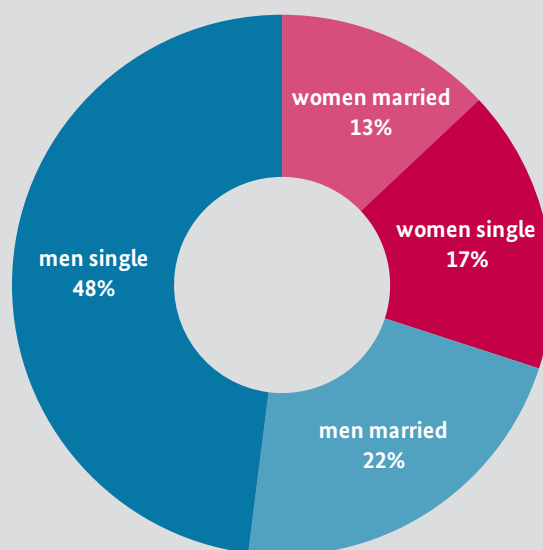
## Who are the African resettlement refugees?

98 % of the African resettlement refugees who arrived in Germany in 2012 and 2014 come from Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. More than 40 % of all African resettlement refugees are young men aged up to 29 (Figure 1). Both the age and the gender structure of the resettlement refugees are similar to the socio-demographic composition of asylum applicants in Germany (BAMF 2016). The vast majority of these individuals had already been through a migration history lasting several years at the time of their acceptance. Most of them left their countries of origin at a young age, in some cases when they were minors (28 %).

**Figure 1: African resettlement refugees by age at the time of arrival in Germany and by gender**



**Figure 2: African resettlement refugees by civil status at the time of acceptance in Germany and by gender**



Source: BAMF, Unit 213 | Resettlement, Humanitarian Reception, Relocation; calculations and presentation by the authors.

The majority of refugees has no family as yet. More than one-third is married (Figure 2). In many cases spouses and/or children of married resettlement-refugees remained in the country of origin or in third countries.

## Flight from violence or state despotism

Most African resettlement refugees had several reasons for leaving their country of origin. The following analysis primarily explores the most important reasons when it came to the migration decision.

Ethnic and religious conflicts in their regions of origin were the main migration reasons for 60 % of refugees (Figure 3). The extent of the endangerment and the time when the decision to depart was taken, differ widely in this group, depending on the individual case constellation. Some Sudanese and Somalis, for instance, had to leave their homes when they were still children because their parents wished to protect them against being recruited to serve in child militias. Others fled as juveniles or when they had already become adults after undergoing mistreatment at the hands of paramilitary units that were operating locally.

Some of refugees, who suffered from religious or ethnic conflicts, had not been victims of violence themselves. They reported of fears arising because of violence in their immediate social environment. The murder or abduction of family members was stated frequently among the reasons for fleeing. Women in particular, who had lost the protection of their families through the death of parents,

siblings or husbands no longer felt safe in their hometowns.

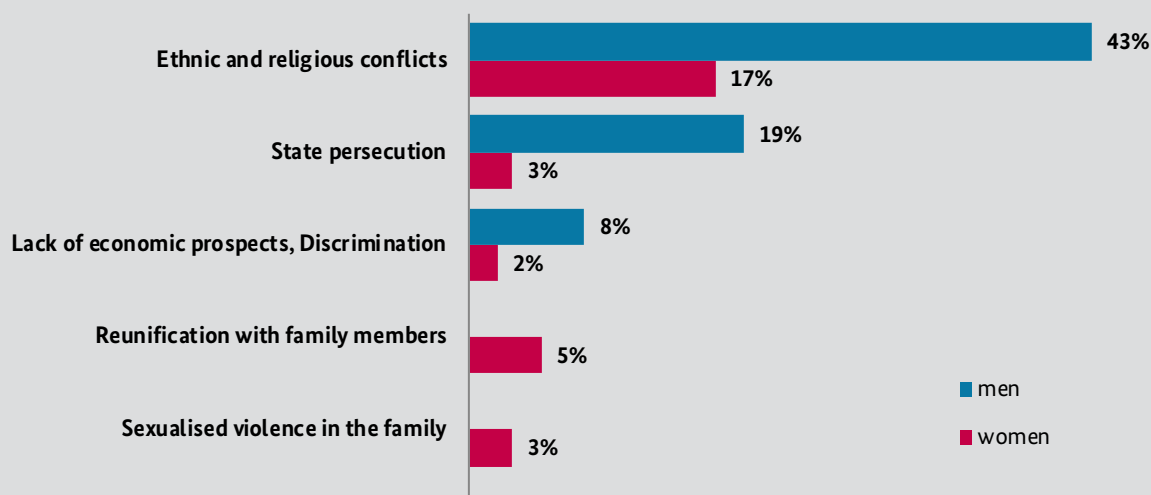
Despotism and the unlawful actions of the state bodies were the main reasons for flight for 22 % of the refugees. This group was mainly comprised of adult men. Some of them had been threatened or detained by the police or the secret services because of their actual or supposed political views. Eritreans were generally unable to remain in their country of origin because they had refused to serve in the military or had deserted.

For 10 % of the refugees, the central motives for migration were not fear of violence or an acute threat to life and limb, but rather a lack of economic prospects and discrimination on the basis of ethnic or religious origin.

A small share of 5 % left their respective countries of origin to join their spouses who had departed earlier. These were exclusively women from Sudan and Ethiopia, whose husbands were working in Libya.

Several refugee-women had been victims of sexualised violence in their families and had therefore left their hometowns. This particularly affected women from Somalia and Ethiopia.

Figure 3: Main reasons for leaving the country of origin



Source: BAMF, Unit 213 | Resettlement, Humanitarian Reception, Relocation; calculations and presentation by the authors.

## The course taken by migration

There is a widespread view in the descriptions of international migration that migration starts with leaving the country of origin and ends with the settlement in a destination country. However, the migration biographies of African resettlement refugees show different patterns of migration. 58 % of the refugees have sought protection and better life conditions in at least two countries on the African continent or in the Arabian Peninsula. A variety of different migration trajectories can be observed here.

### Pattern A: Cross-border flight – onward migration

41 % of the refugees initially sought protection in the neighbouring countries. For instance, persons from Ethiopia and Eritrea frequently fled to Sudan and Somalis to Ethiopia, Kenya or Djibouti. Individual Sudanese and Somalis, however, also migrated to the Republic of Chad. These receiving states were not transit states from the beginning. Refugees made the decision to move on after a considerable amount of time of residence in the first destinations.

Roughly half of these refugees stated that they did not feel safe in the states of first destination as they were scared of being deported because they had no residence status. The majority of the interviewed persons also pointed out that there were virtually no possibilities to make a living in the states of first destination. The refugees therefore sought new migration destinations where they hoped to find work.

The decision to resume migration was determined to a minor degree by the desire to be able to start or continue their studies. Some refugees moved to join relatives or a spouse. The destination countries of onward migration were Libya and Saudi Arabia in particular.

### INTERVIEW WITH RAGEI, MALE, AGED 27:

“I come from Sudan. My father lost all his property and his money as a result of the war, the civil war. I went to school in Sudan for four years, but I had to drop out, because I had to earn money for the family. When I turned 17, all of us, the whole family, fled to Chad. We lived in a kind of refugee accommodation there. When I was 20 or 21, I went to Libya, but my family is still there. They have been in Chad for twelve years. My parents, eight siblings, and no one to feed them ... This is why I went to work in Libya.”

### Pattern B: Internal flight alternative – leaving the country

Roughly 40 % of refugees were subject to an acute threat to life and limb when they decided to take flight. These people had to leave their places of origin literally overnight. Given these circumstances, the options to flee over a border and to select a destination state were highly limited. Many therefore started by moving to a safer place in their own countries, such as to stay with relatives or friends. They then quickly looked for ways to leave the country.

Some of these individuals were able to fall back on support from personal networks which already existed in other states in Africa and in the Arabian Peninsula. The qualitative interviews show that formal and informal job placement structures, in Libya, Syria and Saudi Arabia in particular, have also influenced the choice of destination states.

### INTERVIEW WITH TIKI, FEMALE, AGED 26:

"I'm from Ethiopia. My father died. My mother married another man who was very bad to me. I went to school until fifth grade, but was not permitted to study any more. *[When she was 15, Tiki was sold to a private household where she was mistreated and sexually abused. She managed to flee to a relative when she was 17, who helped her to leave the country.]* I was able to go to Syria. I had no information about any jobs there. However, there are offices in Ethiopia which organise jobs in the Arab countries. And if you get a visa from any country at all, you go there. I worked for a family in Syria for three years and six months. They told me that I would work without pay for the first three months. I had no alternative. I didn't know where else to go, so I accepted that."

### Pattern C: Temporary labour migration – onward migration instead of returning

A smaller group of refugees (10 %) first migrated temporarily to other states looking for work, for instance from Eritrea to Egypt or Libya; from Somalia to Kenya, Saudi Arabia or Syria; from Sudan to Libya. Some had collected many years of experience in circular labour migration or in small-scale cross-border trade. Only when the economic and security situation worsened in their hometowns, they decided to leave their countries of origin permanently or not to return there.

### INTERVIEW WITH BAKRI, MALE, AGED 40:

"I come from Sudan. I went to school for eight years when I was small. Then I had to drop out of school because of the poor financial situation. And then I went to work. I was 17 back then. I worked on a building site for a year, and then I went to Libya, but my wife stayed in Sudan. I also regularly came back to Sudan because I traded in sheep and goats. I often had problems at the border, and these became worse and worse. I was always ripped off at the border, and they often kept me there for days. Then I decided to stay in Libya. I went back to Sudan once more to get my wife and the children. We spent five years together in Libya."

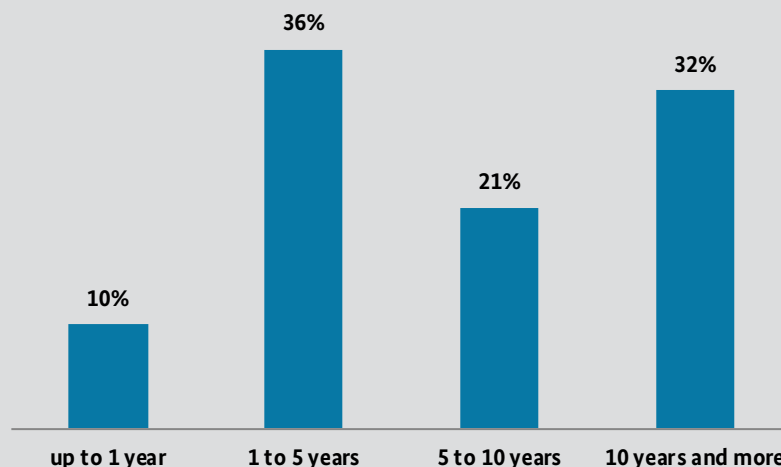
Next to the previously mentioned three migration patterns, there are also other, individual patterns. It is worth mentioning here, for instance, family reunification entailing women going to join their husbands, who had previously fled or found work abroad.

### Life conditions in the original destination states

The migration trajectories described above, entail short- or medium-term stays in several transit and destination states in Africa or the Arabian Peninsula (Figure 4). The refugees spent an average of nine years in these countries.

Libya, Syria and Yemen were the most frequent migration destinations of African resettlement refugees. They also spent the longest periods there.

Figure 4: Duration of stay in the transit and destination states outside Germany



Source: BAMF, Unit 213 | Resettlement, Humanitarian Reception, Relocation; calculations and presentation by the authors.

## Libya

Libya was the destination of many labour migrants until the civil war broke out in 2011. It is estimated that roughly 2.5 million people from various African and Asian countries were living there at the beginning of the war, including 59,000 Sudanese nationals (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2011). Because of the considerable demand for labour, particularly in the construction and oil industries, many migrants sought opportunities to earn money there and financially support their family members who had remained in the countries of origin or in the other states. The vast majority of foreign workers didn't possess a legal residence status in Libya, so that they ran the constant risk of being deported.

74 % of the African resettlement refugees lived in Libya for several years. A large share of these individuals carried out mainly unskilled work there (such as unskilled labour in construction or in agriculture). Women were largely employed as housekeepers. Almost one-third of all refugees in the sample lived in Libya carried out skilled work, such as in teaching, in technical occupations or at University.

Discrimination such as unequal pay or retention of wages was part of African migrants' everyday lives in Libya. When the war broke out, the situation for foreign workers worsened. Sub-Saharan migrants were particularly affected, given that they were unprotected because of their insecure legal status and open racism.

## Syria

Syria was an important country of destination before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. Palestinians and Iraqis in particular, as well as refugees from countries further away such as Somalia or Sudan, found protection there. Furthermore, foreign domestic workers from Asian and African countries were deliberately recruited; roughly 75,000 to 100,000 foreign female workers were living in Syria in 2010 (Mehchy/Doko 2010).

13 % of the African resettlement refugees spent some time in Syria. The majority of them were women who worked as housekeepers in Syrian families. Many of them reported exploitative employment and related health problems.

## Yemen

Yemen was also a relevant migration destination for people from countries of the Horn of Africa prior to the increasing conflicts and the violence escalation from 2013 onwards. In particular Somali and, to a lesser degree, Ethiopian refugees attempted to reach the country on the Ara-

bian Peninsula over the Gulf of Aden or the Red Sea. An estimated 196,000 Somali refugees were living in Yemen in 2011 (UNHCR 2011).

Whilst Somali nationals were registered as refugees immediately after their arrival and were able to move within the country legally, asylum-seekers from other countries were usually at risk of being detained and deported. Neither recognised refugees nor people without a regular status had access to legal work, education and healthcare in Yemen, so that they constantly had to fight to survive.

It was primarily single mothers who lived in Yemen for a longer period of time since most of the men moved on in search of work in neighbouring Saudi Arabia or in the Gulf States (de Regt 2007). Also among the African resettlement refugees, exclusively women from Somalia had lived for several years in precarious conditions in Yemen.

## Destination Europe?

The analyses show that the vast majority of resettlement refugees initially migrated to places on the African continent and in states of the Arabian Peninsula (Figure 5), aiming to establish a livelihood for themselves there.

Presumably only 3 % of all refugees in the sample considered Europe as the destination from the outset. Within this sample, this particularly relates to young men from Somalia, who reached Libya within a short period of time via several transit countries, and attempted to cross the sea to Italy after a very short stay there. This attempt was blocked by the Libyan border police in all cases. All of those young men then remained in Libya. They stayed there for between one and three years, until the begin of the civil war in 2011.

A small group of refugees did not consider the option of irregular entry to Europe until after the military conflicts broke out in the states of refuge Libya (2011), Syria (2011) and Yemen (2013). The data reveals that the refugees were very much aware what risks they were taking. Some individuals, for instance, report that relatives or friends had died attempting to cross the sea. Some refugees nonetheless made (unsuccessful) attempts to get to Europe by plane or by sea using services of traffickers.

The majority of African resettlement refugees, however, did not consider Europe to be a realistic migration option despite the difficult circumstances in which they had lived in Syria, Libya and other states. The reasons for this include that they did not have the necessary financial resources to be able to enter Europe irregularly. When the security situation in the destination states worsened,

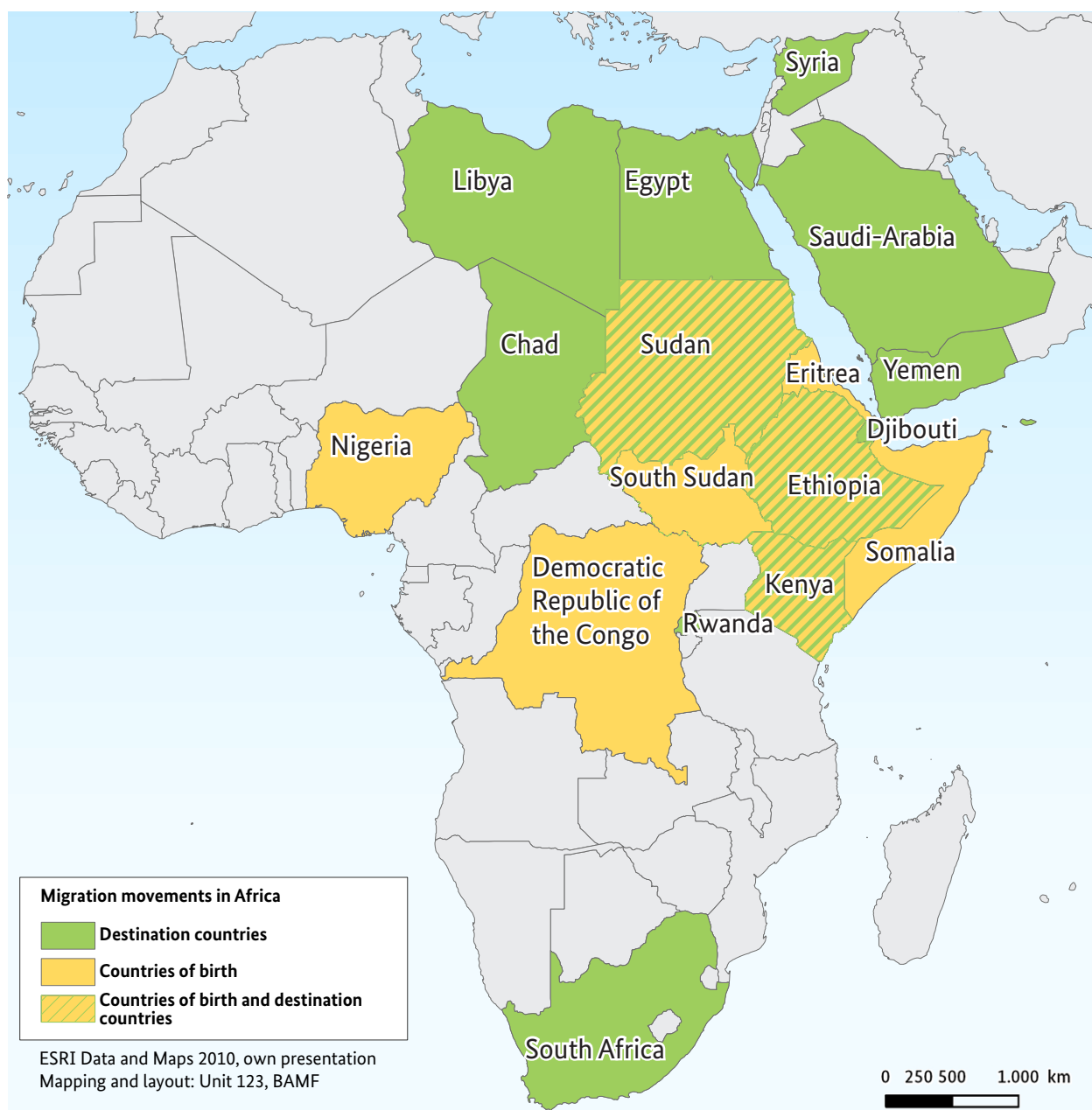


people tried to reach the neighbouring states with the few resources which they had at their disposal. Some African refugees, for instance, reached Tunisia from Libya and found protection in the UNHCR refugee camp in Shousha at the Tunisian-Libyan border. Furthermore, the decision not to move on to Europe was made by using information from “compatriots” whom the interviewees considered to be trustworthy. Finally, most refugees started to deal with the option of Europe as a destination region when they were suggested for resettlement to Germany.

### INTERVIEW WITH ABEBA, FEMALE, AGED 25:

“There was a war in Libya, and we couldn’t get out. There was shooting everywhere. It wasn’t easy to go via the sea at that time, because it was the beginning of the year and the weather was not very good. Many people who left died. But we had no choice, and we wanted to try. We had this telephone number, a contact from the radio, and we called there [it was an Eritrean priest in Italy helping African migrants]. The man said that it was not irrelevant whether I was dead. He went on to say that there were a lot of people going to Tunisia. And we could go with them ...”

Figure 5: Migration destinations of African resettlement refugees



Source: BAMF, Unit 213 | Resettlement, Humanitarian Reception, Relocation.



## The complexity and dynamics of migration decisions: An outlook

The media frequently present African migration as an exodus of “poverty-stricken refugees” to Europe. “They are young, and television is present in the dirtiest corners of the slums, tempting them with images of a world full of abundance”. This is a part of a report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Prantl 2010). According to this article, Africans are seen as potential migrants and refugees, who leave their hometowns, in which poverty and conflict are pervasive, and set off on an arduous journey taking them through many countries on the African continent. However, these are only temporary stops before they make their way to the “dream of living in Europe”.

It is however questionable whether this picture really covers the whole reality of migration in Africa. Studies based on statistical data clearly show that African migration is becoming increasingly diverse. Not only Europe but also other regions of the world such as Asia, North America and Oceania play a role as important destination countries. However, the largest share of African migration continues to take place on the African continent itself (Flahaux/de Haas 2014). There are hardly any reliable results so far, particularly on the migration motives and trajectories of the vast majority of African migrants, who are unable to reach Europe, or who do not wish to go there.

The analysis presented here is unable to offer a comprehensive overview, but it does illustrate an important facet of African migrants' migration decisions. Fear of violence, political persecution or discrimination in the regions of origin indeed assume a major place in the refugees' stories, but migration decisions are much more diverse, taking the economic situation and family into account.

The migration destinations of the large majority of African resettlement refugees were not situated within Europe, but within Africa, preferably neighbour states, but also on the Arabian Peninsula. The refugees usually lived in several countries with the intention to stay there before they continued travelling to Europe. Previously chosen destination countries did not become transit countries until it appeared to be impossible to remain there. Under these circumstances, migration decisions are taken on a situative basis. Depending on current opportunity structures and on the information available on the ground, migrants and refugees consider whether to remain in the country they have chosen or to continue to migrate. Social contacts, employment opportunities in the potential destination regions, as well as the costs and risks of migration, play a significant role in this context.

The available data show that refugees actively seek information on the risks of different migration routes, including irregular ones, and weigh up their pros and cons. However, a balanced migration decision is only ever possible when there is no direct danger to life and limb. It can therefore be presumed that intensive information campaigns regarding the possibilities and risks of migrating to Europe are most effective for those who managed to reach the countries of first destination, where some degree of safety is ensured.

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